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ABSTRACT

The General Educational Development (GED) program at Shawnee State Community College originated from a request by the local Private Industry Council to design and implement a course of study for economically disadvantaged adults who desire to prepare to take the GED exam and who meet eligibility requirements. The program, which evolved within the Department of Developmental Education, was designed to be integrated into existing programs and systems whenever possible, using operative procedures that resemble the design and procedures of most other programs at the college. The GED program and the developmental program are linked in two ways. First, GED students receive developmental credit upon receiving a passing grade for a course. Second, GED instructors come from the pool of developmental instructors, who find that developmental techniques and methods transfer well to GED classes. The first quarter of implementation of the GED program at Shawnee was a learning experience for both the students and the educators. Among the discoveries made during the initial period were: (1) GED students required more time and attention than regular developmental students; (2) many of the problems of GED students related to their economic situation; (3) poor attendance among GED students required that attendance expectations be spelled out clearly to prospective students; (4) a counseling component was needed to complement coursework; and (5) scheduling GED exams proved so difficult that Shawnee applied to be and was authorized to serve as a GED test site. Statistical data indicate that 77% of the students who completed the GED program also passed the GED exam, 22% obtained employment, and 25% continued their education at Shawnee. (LAL)

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GED Program on Campus Works

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Abstract

This article describes how a GED preparation program evolved within the Department of Developmental Education at Shawnee State Community College. Although the article focuses on the mechanics of setting up and debugging the program, emphasis also rests on the uplifting personal experiences that the program has provided both the GED students and the personnel at the college who work with them. Also included are data that support the success of the Shawnee program.

GED on Campus Works

We who work in developmental education have no doubts that what we do for students has positive effects. Each working day we observe firsthand our students' growth and development. We don't have to rely on statistics and other data to verify the results of our efforts. Our results come straight from the students with whom we work: Students tell us and show us. They let us share their successes in ways that students who have always succeeded in school could never do.

These tangible rewards make my work in developmental education a personally satisfying experience. Having worked with a variety of educational programs at different levels in my professional life, I can say without reserve that no other field has provided me with as much personal satisfaction so directly and frequently as has my work in developmental education. As with any job, however, some aspects outshine others. Some experiences are more positively intense than others. Such is the case with one program with which I have had the pleasure to work, a program designed to prepare students to take the examination of General Educational Development, or GED. If asked why this program stands out from the

other developmental activities around me, I would say that intensity is certainly the key. With no other group of developmental-level students have I seen such an ardent desire to reach an educational goal or have I seen such marked personal change.

Background

The GED Program at Shawnee State Community College originated from a request by the local Private Industry Council to design and implement a course of study for economically disadvantaged adults who desire to prepare to take the GED exam and who meet eligibility requirements for Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA) assistance. College personnel responded to this request and promptly began making plans for what was for Shawnee a new venture in education. When college planners looked to see where the new program would best fit in the existing organization, they fixed their sights on the Department of Developmental Education. Who on campus was better suited to design and implement a remedial program for the GED students?

Basic Program Structure

All of us at the college who became involved in the development of the GED program agreed that whenever possible we should integrate it into existing programs and systems. Consequently, the design of the GED

Preparation Program and its operative procedures resemble the design and procedures of most other programs at the college. GED students are admitted to the college using the same admissions procedures applied to all first-time entering students. The program, moreover, consists of five regularly scheduled courses--reading, writing, math, social studies, and science--that correspond to the five areas of the GED exam and that run concurrently with other courses at the college. GED students are registered in these courses, and they receive developmental credit upon receiving a passing grade for a course. Passing all of one's courses does not, however, automatically award a student his or her GED: Only passing the official GED test can do that.

The GED program and the developmental program are also linked through staffing. GED instructors come from the same pool of developmental instructors who themselves have chosen to teach developmental-level courses and have demonstrated the professional and personal qualities that distinguish good developmental educators. Our instructors have found generally that the same techniques and methods used in developmental classes transfer well to GED classes.

Staffing also includes a coordinator. The

anticipated demands for taking care of the many details associated with effectively implementing, overseeing, and evaluating the program required more time and attention than any of us already on staff could spare. Although in the planning stage the hiring of a coordinator seemed somewhat of a luxury, as time progressed the necessity of a coordinator was apparent. With only a skeletal plan, this person assumed the responsibility of making the program work.

Program Start-Up and Adjustments

One of the coordinator's first duties involved recruiting students for the program. Employing varied means of communication--news releases, posters, newspaper advertisements, public service announcements, radio talk-show interviews, and word-of-mouth communication--resulted in a steady stream of inquiries about the program. People inquiring about the program were subsequently screened for JTPA eligibility and enrolled in the program. Having advertised the program far and wide, filling the quota of thirty-six students for the first quarter of the program proved not too difficult. The fact that JTPA funds subsidized all coursework, materials, and even the cost of the test attracted many individuals.

Before classes began the thirty-six selected GED

students gathered for a full day of orientation and testing. Following a welcoming and general introduction to the college, the students received a tour of the campus. We wanted very much for the GED students to feel comfortable in the campus environment. On every available occasion we emphasized that they were not just visitors on campus, but full-time students with all of the privileges and responsibilities that accompany that status. As part of the orientation each student took a commercial GED predictor test which produces GED-type scores for each of the five areas on the test of general educational development. This predictor test provides program administrators and instructors information about the entry competency level of the students. Predictor test scores also later function as benchmarks for evaluating the progress of students as they move through the program.

Because we at Shawnee were new to this kind of educational program, we expected the first quarter to be a learning experience for both the GED students and ourselves. We realized that no matter how thoroughly we planned we were bound to overlook something and that we would have to make adjustments to the program as snags occurred--as in fact they did. Generally, snags

fit into either of two categories: ones that simply proved interesting to observers and ones that proved the foundations for procedural changes.

One of the first major discoveries was that GED students require more of our time and attention than do our regular developmental students. We quickly learned that for each service used by developmental students, GED students use that service to a greater degree. This greater use applies to virtually every developmental activity, including contact with instructors, tutorial assistance, and use of individualized learning resources. We additionally discovered that our GED students require help with matters outside of the usual types of assistance given regular developmental students.

Because our GED program serves persons who are economically disadvantaged, many of their problems relate to their economic situation. For instance, our students often have problems with transportation. Although they may have automobiles to commute to and from campus, their cars are usually old and unreliable. On several occasions we overcame this problem through helping students arrange carpooling, but dead batteries and flat tires consistetly frustrate attempts at perfect attendance. Our students also frequently have

problems getting help watching their children while they are in class. Uncommon problems have included tutoring one of our students who got drunk one night, rammed several parked cars, and received a lengthy jail sentence. With the cooperation of the county sheriff, we were able to continue this student's instruction in jail. The sheriff even granted the student enough release time from jail to take his GED exam, which he passed.

Most of the problems that arose in the first quarter of the program required only minor adjustments to the original program design. Some problems, however, required more major changes. For instance, all of the GED instructors expressed a concern about the poor attendance record of the GED students. From the outset, a disturbing number of the students cut class, and by the end of the quarter we noted a high correlation between habitual absentees and their low grades in coursework and poor scores on predictor tests.

Corrective actions have since mitigated the attendance problem. For example, as we have interviewed prospective students for the second and subsequent quarters, we have spelled out very specifically our expectations of them with regard to

attendance. We emphasize that we expect good attendance and that if an applicant doesn't intend to attend classes on a regular basis, he or she should not pursue applying. After discussing the problem with instructors in the program, we also instituted an attendance policy that states clearly that students missing an unacceptable number of classes will be dropped from the program and denied the chance to take the exam free of charge. This emphasis on attendance has shown evidence of working. The first quarter that the program was offered only three students in thirty-six had perfect attendance. The following quarter nine students had perfect attendance.

Another change to the program resulted from a shortcoming in the program's original design. We knew before the program began that the people we intended to serve educationally had problems in addition to their academic ones, and, moreover, that these problems affected their academic development. Regardless, in the original design we had made no substantive provisions to work with the students' nonacademic needs. Consequently, when we revised the program, we incorporated a counseling component into the program to complement coursework. Each week program participants spend two hours working with a college counselor who

works with them on a variety of topics that range from dealing with personal crises to managing time effectively. The addition of the counseling component has proven a valuable and successful addition to our program.

One other change to the original organization of the program deserves mentioning. A major goal of the program is to provide an uncomplicated means for people wanting to get their GED to accomplish their objective. Toward fulfilling this goal, the college has striven to eliminate as many of the obstacles (e.g. administrative) as possible that might stand in the way of GED aspirants. As already indicated, funding covers all of the costs associated with instruction (tuition, fees, books) and all costs associated with taking the test (application and administration fees); therefore, cost should not prevent a participant from meeting his or her goal. What did prove a problem for our students was scheduling test administrations.

Upon attempting to schedule our students for a GED test administration, the program coordinator discovered that (a) the administrator could only test a third of the group at a sitting, (b) testing of the group would have to be spread out over three weeks (We wanted to test them while information was fresh and their

enthusiasm was high.), (c) the administrator had other obligations that prevented him from scheduling tests in the advanced time requested, and (d) students would have to travel to his test site located in a rural setting some ten miles from the college. These conditions proved much less than favorable, and as a result Shawnee State applied to the State of Ohio to become a GED test site to serve not only the college's program participants but any other individual requiring GED test administration. In July, 1985, state GED officials authorized Shawnee State Community College to function as a GED test site, the first new GED test site in Ohio in thirty years.

GED Program Evaluation

Like other programs at the college, the GED Program is evaluated in various fashions on a regular and continuous basis, and evaluations of the GED Program have been good. For example, statistical data show that 77% of the students who have completed the Shawnee program have passed the GED exam. This rate compares with a national average of roughly 66% (AACRAO, p. 3). Furthermore, 22% of the program completers have obtained employment, while another 25% have continued their education at Shawnee.

Non-statistical data also support the success of

the GED program. When we have interviewed GED students, they have cited multiple benefits that they have derived from the program. Some of these benefits are "increased self-confidence, improved self-image, new interest in further training, an increased possibility of promotions and further training at current job, new job opportunities, a renewed desire to earn an income through employment rather than through public welfare assistance, [and] the ability to serve as an example of educational success to spouse and children."

Comments

Some developmental educators rooted in the tradition of individualization of treatment might quibble about the rigid group structure of the Shawnee GED preparation program. Granted, we developmental educators know that the individual needs of some students are best served by flexible schedules and teaching methods. But we also know from experience that not all students perform well in an loosely structured learning environment, and Shawnee's program responds to the needs of these individuals. The Shawnee program is especially well suited to individuals who lack the discipline and study habits necessary to get the greatest benefit from flexible

programs of study. Indeed, some of the students who have completed our program have participated previously in other less structured programs, and they express a clear preference for the Shawnee program.

The popularity of Shawnee's structured program is also evidenced by the demand for admission into the program. Whereas at the outset of the program the coordinator devoted a large percentage of her time to recruitment, now we have to turn away people. As word about the program has spread, interested GED aspirants contact the college almost daily. Although we first relied heavily on media to advertise the program in order to attract program candidates, most inquiries now result from word-of-mouth recommendations.

Since the public has discovered that we are offering GED-level instruction we have received many inquiries from individuals and social agencies asking whether we offer "help" for people with severe reading and writing problems. We didn't, but because of the large number of these inquiries we have developed a GED Program spinoff to assist persons who read at or below the fourth-grade level. Like the GED Program the new Adult Basic Skills Program has presented welcomed challenges to department personnel and has blended in with on-line developmental activities in the

Developmental Education Department. The public obviously recognizes a good thing when they see it, and, furthermore, they recognize its potential--possibly better at times than we in the field do.

Conclusion

The data we have collected to monitor and evaluate the GED Program clearly indicate that the GED students have gained much from the program at Shawnee. However, the GED students have not been the only ones to benefit from it. Day-to-day exposure to these "success stories in the making" has proven an uplifting experience to all involved with the GED Preparation Program. In my professional experience as a developmental educator I have never worked with a more personally rewarding project. My enthusiasm for the program peaks when I see the pride that these students display at the GED Awards and Recognition Program that we put on for them at the completion of their course of study. On this occasion the audience is filled to capacity with families and friends of the GED students who come to see the program completers cross the stage to receive their certificates of program completion. These completers are individuals who for a wide variety of reasons (economic, early pregnancies, health) did not

have the opportunity to finish high school with others of their own age. These are individuals who have felt severely handicapped because they lack a high school diploma and have suffered a quiet, personal indignity and regret. Some of them, we realize, will not pass the exam on their first attempt, but even if they never pass, they will have accomplished something the results of which will effect their lives in positive ways now, in the near future, and, we like to think, forever.

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